PROMISES TO KEEP
I John 3:14-18
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The late Tom Dooley was a young Navy surgeon in the 1950's who resigned his commission to practice medicine in the mountains of what was once Laos. He established hospitals, trained midwives and aids, taught hygiene, raised money, and badgered government officials and business executives and religious leaders all over the world. He was instrumental in the organization of Medico and became a well known and somewhat glamorous figure with the American media - Life Magazine, Readers' Digest, Saturday Review. Dooley expressed an idealism, an altruism, a self sacrificing dedication which inspired a lot of people in the late fifties and early sixties. VISTA, the Peace Corps, the Civil Rights Movement were expressions of that same high idealism and vision of a better world for all people. And then, at 32, Dooley had cancer. After surgery he returned to Laos, fully aware that his disease was terminal. He worked frantically, literally until he dropped two years later. At his funeral, a Requiem Mass in St. Louis, the presiding Bishop read several lines from Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" because the poem had been a favorite of Dooley's.

"Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."

The Bishop said Dooley loved that poem, that he had miles to go before he slept and promises to keep. The Bishop said Dooley had kept the promise. I have never forgotten Tom Dooley. His life expressed for me two great truths: that the meaning of our humanity is somehow established when we put our lives in the service of some great cause, and, that each of us decides, in these terms, to live fully or not to live fully. No one can decide for us. It is for each of us, a personal and urgent matter. Both of those meanings are, by my lights, at the heart of the Christian faith as well.

I am told that those lovely, dark, deep woods which sound so welcoming in Frost's poem can be read as a metaphor for death. The moment then becomes critically important - a fierce struggle between two alternatives: to drive into oblivion, or to live. And the resolution is one of brave intentionality. "But I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep..."

The first is about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for one who is lost. The second story is about a woman who turns her house upside down looking for one lost coin. The final story is about a man who had two sons. It is a story about grace.

What this story is not about is a prodigal son. It is a misleading designation. Prodigality means to be wasteful in a reckless way, to squander, or it can mean to be generous or lavish. In both cases the character who is prodigal is the father, and a close second is the fatted calf. The sons I would submit simply act like people usually act.

Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest who writes novels about grace, turned up last Sunday in the magazine section of The New York Times in a new feature, "For Men Only." The topic was "Fathers and Sons." Capon observes: "It is a tribute to the indestructibility of human nature that males can spend some 18 years in a paternal presence that is by turns mute and explosive, tyrannical and charming, aloof and meddling, heartless and sentimental, omnipotent and fragile - and still not have to be carried out feet first." (NYT Magazine, 9/18/83, p. 110)

The sons in this story - the fellow out spending the family fortune in sin city, and the sour martyr working overtime in the field, are acting normally. The father is not. He is prodigal: he is unusual. Bill Cosby does a routine on his own experience as a son and a father which illustrates. He confesses to abiding skepticism about the accuracy of the George Washington story involving the cutting down of a cherry tree, George's honesty about his culpability and his father's marvelous even-handed acceptance and refusal to punish George. Fathers, Cosby notes - don't act like that. Any father he knew would at least ask the boy what he was thinking about - and muse out loud whether the boy was capable of rational thought.

The parable of the man and two sons is about God and a love so extravagant it borders on the foolish. The parable is about a love so unusual, so without conditions, that it comes to have a power of its own. Something was working on that young boy as he slopped the hogs in a far country, and experienced a hunger so deep he contemplated eating the stocks he was feeding to the pigs. It was more than physical emptiness. When he remembered a full larder and place at the table - what he remembered truly was a love which was still loving him, and a place at the table still being held for him, and even though he constructed that homecoming speech and rehearsed it over and over, he knew he'd never have to say it, never get to say it. He knew when he came to the brow of the hill and looked across that valley - he'd see his father there, waiting. And all of that, more than physical hunger, turned the son around and brought him home. The name for it is grace.

It is what is unique about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Religion is mainly a human device to persuade God to love us. The idea is simple. God has rules. If we obey the rules God will love us, treat us generously. If we disobey the rules God will hate us and we will be treated badly. The name of the process by which we define, describe, and enforce the rules is "religion."

The abiding power of that dynamic is always a surprise. I stopped for gas early this morning - sometimes prodigal sons leave it on empty - and as I stepped up to the window with my collar on a man buying cigarettes, obviously on his way home from an all-night celebration, said, "Oh, oh, Father - you caught me. Guess I better go to church this morning." That's religion.

being forgotten; living only for ourselves and then feeling unneeded; being unconcerned about others and wanting no one to be concerned about us; neither laughing nor being laughed at; neither crying for another nor being cried for by another." (p. 1-2)

With a small illustration Soelle helps us understand how subtle and life-denying materialism can be. One of her neighbors, an elderly gentleman, called her over to inspect some minor damage to his property caused by playing children. He was very distressed: he said - "This house is all we have left." Soelle observes: "He is already a dead man."

To the question of the ages, "How can we live? What must we do to live?" the Gospel of Jesus Christ says, "love: love the brethern - love the people God gives you to love; love the community of which you are a part; love your family, your school, your friends; love particularly your brothers and sisters in Christ. The power of that derives from the fact that it was not conceived in the quiet detachment of the scholar's study, but in the humdrum and dangerous world of the first century, by Christian people who had the interesting responsibility of trying to describe their experience as disciples of Jesus in an environment that vascillated between total indifference to them and all-out hatred. They were alternatingly ignored and burned to death - and the words they chose became, in this context, stunning! "We know," one of them wrote, "that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren." That's an astounding assertion: if you want to live you have to love. If you want to move from death to life you have to make some choices, some affirmations about yourself which have to do with the pragmatic business of loving those people God has given you to love. It sounds so simple. It sounds almost too simple to be useful in the complexity of the life we lead. Of course it isn't simple at all. It surely isn't easy. History has brought our generation to a turning point: a point of important choices. "How shall we live? How shall we proceed?" And to even the most cynical, the imperative to love, to somehow find the key to justice and peace and the end of hunger - as an expression of love - looms as our last and best and only hope. Years ago a New Testament scholar wrote words about this passage, which are, I am sure, more relevant today, "Love is a requirement which the universe itself imposes on man. Ethical love is not an option, nor an invention of priests and moralists, nor an evolutionary sport. Love confronts (us) as a Christian categorical imperative from the heart of reality." (Paul Hoon, The Interpreter's Bible, vol. 12, p. 260)

That's the broad view. History has brought us to the divide. We must decide to love one another and our nation and brothers and sisters in other nations - if the life we hold in trust for future generations is to survive. There is a more modest, more personal perspective, of course. In the context of our own lives each of us must decide to live, to be, to affirm life. For us, on a personal level that is a faith decision. It often is cast in religious or theological terms. It always is a decision to affirm oneself by loving someone or something else.

Soelle writes: "There is indeed a God who must be experienced over and over again. We find him not in storm, earthquake or fire...but in our decisions for him." (op. cit., p. 2)

But that far country, wherever it is, is not our home. And the fact that on occasion we know it with a terrible clarity: the fact that we do experience the "essential homelessness" to which the theologian referred, the sin-sick heart for which there is a Balm in Gilead of the old Gospel hymn, the homesickness of a young boy in a far country, is evidence of the power of God's grace pulling at us, relentlessly, always, never giving up on us.

There is a power at work in us, reminding us who we are - making us restless, homesick, calling us home. The Hound of Heaven, Francis Thompson called it and wrote beautifully about God's relentless pursuit down across the labyrinth of the years. Divine activity in life, the Christian faith contends, is strong, subtle, and relentless. It is a love that does not let us go.

The Christian Gospel calls out of us a confession of dependence on God that most of us are reluctant to make. We want to find God, not be found by him. Grace, someone said recently, sounds unAmerican. We want to understand God, not be understood. We want to feel that our religiosity is a mark of our goodness, our piety, our faith, not a gift from outside ourselves. The final symbol of grace is a stumbling block...the cross of Jesus Christ. What it means is that God's love ultimately dies for us, heals us by laying down life itself. It is unlike anything that has ever happened or will ever happen.

The response then is not grim piety and humorless morality. The only response left is the joyful banquet of homecoming, the party thrown by the prodigal father. Again, let Robert Capon describe it: (the father) "wants his son home, not so they can spend their days in the confessional box, but so that, having gotten past that tiresome preliminary, they can both get on with the lavish party which is the specialty of their many-mansioned house...Grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celibrants in the world...shouting its way through the streets pounding at every door...until the prodigals come out and the elder brothers take their fingers out of their ears." (op. cit., p. 73)

The purpose is to welcome us home. It is to open us to the healing, redeeming love of God that can literally make us into new people, can literally give us each day as a new and unexpected gift, can literally remake us so that, home at last, each person, each relationship becomes a precious treasure, a surprise, a good gift of God.

One of the joys of maturing is to understand more and more about the dynamics between that father, running down the road to welcome his son, and that particularly unloveable child. The older you get, the more plausible grace becomes, I find. The older you become the more you realize that it's a miracle of grace if anyone loves you. The time does come when most of us finally see the truth, namely that good, human love is always grace: that it has to do not with our merit, our attractiveness, our loveableness - all very transitory conditions - but with the grace of that person - that woman or man or child who somehow finds it possible to continue loving us, putting up with us, tolerating us, hoping with us, standing with us to the end. The time does come when we see, at last, that God's grace, in Jesus Christ, calls us home, then welcomes us home, and that we are finally, in Karl Barth's famous metaphor "left with the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." Thanks be to God for that. Amen.

And it is not without cost - for it would be far easier to cut back, say no to all the appeals for assistance, shut it all down. But before we do that we should stand for just a moment before the intense power of Elijah Pierce's work, "Feed My Sheep" and sense that this is the way to live - to be - to love.

Psychologically, we are learning that each person decides to be and that the decision to be is often synonymous with deciding to love. "We love and will the world as an immediate, spontaneous totality. We will the world, create it by our decision, our fiat, our choice..." is the way Rollo May describes it. (Love and Will, p. 324)

Where does it come into focus for you? What miles do you have yet to go? What promises do you have yet to keep? What choices for life, what decisions to love are you not making because thay are too risky? The surprising message of Christianity is that God wants you to be all you can be: that God the creator calls each of us to choose life: and that the context for that decision more often than not will be the opportunity to love.

The Good News is that God shows the way, enables the way - by loving us. The Good News is that life, our life, has been affirmed by this: "that he laid down his own life for us." The Good News is that in faith, in trust, in choosing - we do "pass from death into life because we love." Amen.